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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results from a survey of 585 Illinois parents of children with disabilities that examined their satisfaction with school district practices. Five independent variables were statistically significant predictors of overall satisfaction with school district practices: (1) school responsiveness to concerns; (2) help in understanding rights; (3) knowledge of community services available; (4) agreement on day and time of meetings; and (5) having a person designated to contact for information. The paper also identifies obstacles to the implementation of the informed parental involvement and consent mandate in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, including the disparity between educational levels of parents, district confusion about the difference between an informed parent and a notified parent, use of technical jargon by professionals, philosophical differences in how children with disabilities are viewed, and district avoidance of difficult parents. (CR)

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Running head: PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS

Perceptions of Parents of Children with Disabilities Regarding School District Practices

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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates notice, informed parental involvement and consent for every formal component of referral, testing, determining eligibility for services, and placement decisions. Implementation of this mandate varies from one school district to another. Obstacles to informed parental involvement are identified from a search of the literature. A survey research project in Illinois conducted at three special education cooperatives produced 585 responses. Five independent variables were statistically significant predictors of over all satisfaction with school district practices; school responsiveness to concerns; help in understanding rights; knowledge of community services available; agreement on day and time of meetings; and a liaison known.

Perceptions of Parents of Children with Disabilities Regarding School District Practices

Public Law 94-142, Education of the Handicapped Act (1975) and its reauthorizations, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1991 and 1997) mandate informed parental involvement and consent. At every step, the referral, testing, determination of eligibility, design of the Individual Education Plan (IEP), and determination of the most appropriate placement, parental involvement and informed consent are required.

Actual implementation of the mandate varies greatly from one school district to another. Further, the intended level of parental understanding and degree of equal involvement appears not to have been fully realized anywhere (James & Prasse, 1996; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). Reasons for the disparity are identified in the literature as follows.

Obstacles to implementation of the mandated involvement include: 1) the disparity between educational levels of parents; 2) district confusion about the difference between an informed parent and a notified parent; 3) use of technical jargon by professionals; 4) philosophical differences In how children with handicaps are viewed, i.e., along a continuum versus a dichotomy of handicapped versus normal; and 4) district avoidance of difficult parents (Engel, 1991; James & Prasse, 1996).

Secretary of Education Richard Riley has called upon educators to enhance the opportunities of children with handicaps to succeed in the mainstream of life by actively incorporating parents as equal partners in compliance with the law and with best

practices in education. Researchers have been studying the problem. One example involving action research and the use of parent to parent programs is the Beach Center on Families and Disability at the University of Kansas where a cadre of people led by Ann Turnbull have been working, under a Federal grant, to prepare parents, preservice teachers and educators for their collaborative equity roles (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996).

Method

Procedure

In an effort to determine the current status of how parents perceive their interactions with schools in Illinois, a survey research project was conducted at three special education cooperatives. Questions were selected from the Rules and Regulations To Govern Special Education in the State of Illinois to measure parent involvement as required by the law. Surveys were returned directly to the researchers and were anonymous. Parents were invited, however, to self identify if they were willing to be interviewed personally and/or take part in a focus group discussion. One of the researchers traveled to the three sites. One was located in the south suburbs of Chicago, one in a completely rural area in the center of the State, and one in a suburb of a small city in the north central section. Twenty parents were personally interviewed and 13 took part in the three focus group discussions.

Qualitative Results

Out of 405 who responded to the question of whether they see their schools as supportive or adversarial, 347 or 86% saw their school districts as often or always supportive. Only 58, or 14% perceived their districts to be often or always adversarial.

Parents considered their schools to be primarily well meaning but at the same time reported that they did not feel equal in interactions, did not feel the district helped them be sufficiently educated and informed, and that they resented needing to monitor the identification, planning and implementation of special education to ensure that their child was receiving the quality of services to which they were entitled. As one parent put it, "The school means well but they don't have a clue about how to interact with us."

Twenty questions dealt with specific aspects of parent school district interactions, while seven others were demographic. From the survey answers and comment section, the personal interviews and the focus group discussions, a list of representative parent suggestions for improvement was compiled and is included in Appendix A. Although the above discussion of results represents a qualitative analysis, parent replies also were statistically analyzed and yielded significant relationships between the answers to five questions and the level of satisfaction.

Statistical Analysis

The data from 585 respondents were analyzed by forward stepwise regression. The dependent variable was over all satisfaction. There were 15 independent variables: satisfaction with program, child likes school, school responsive, parents feel an equal part, meeting date/time agreement, timely communication, opinions equally considered, received *Parent Guide*, helped to understand rights, given knowledge of community services, opportunities provided to receive education, education provided on how to interact with student, liaison known, library available, and networking/support groups available. Most of the independent variables were selected from mandated

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requirements of the *Rules and Regulations to Govern Special Education in Illinois*, a document that is required to be in compliance with the Federal laws referred to in paragraph one. A few questions were revised by an advisory committee of parents and after a pretest of the survey to insure that all parents would understand the intent of the questions and relate to it well enough to be able to answer.

A total of five independent variables entered into the prediction system. These, in order, were (1) school responsiveness to parent concerns, (2) parents helped to understand rights, (3) parents given knowledge of community services, (4) meeting day/time agreement and (5) liaison known. The five variables explained 23.3% of the variance and were statistically significant ($F(5 \text{ and } 447) = 27.15, p>0.01$.) Overall satisfaction tended to be highest when the system was responsive to parent needs, was explained in a meeting with the parent and the team at which services were fully explained, the rights of the child and parent were delineated and when the name of the contact person with whom to address current and ensuing issues was identified.

In addition, the factor structure of the instrument was investigated. The 15 variables were correlated. They were (A) satisfaction with the child's school program, (B) child likes going to school, © school personnel responsive to needs and concerns, (D) feel an equal part of the MDC and IEP teams, (E) effort made to arrange date and time of meeting so parents can attend, (F) communications received in a timely manner, (G) parent opinions and advice considered equally, (H) received parent rights booklet, (I) helped to understand rights, (J) assisted in finding needed community services, (K) opportunities to learn more about child's disability provided, (L)

opportunities to learn more about how to interact with the child, (M) person designated to contact for information and assistance, (N) library collection of books, articles and videos accessible, (O) networking/support groups available. The r-matrix was factor analyzed by the principal components solution with unity as the initial commonality estimates. The scree test was applied to determine the number of factors: the first seven Eigenvalues were: 5.05, 2.12, 1.27, 1.09, 0.93, 0.73 and 0.63. The three factor solution was then rotated by varimax solution. Loadings of absolute values of 0.40 or higher were detected as significant.

The second factor tended to be associated with services rendered by the provider. Loading positively on this dimension were the following variables, (A) service satisfaction, © responsive, (D) equal involvement, (F) communications, and (G) opinion valued. The first dimension tended to be associated with services external to the provider. Correlating positively to the factor were, (J) assisted in finding community services, (K) educational opportunities about the disability, (L) help learn to interact with child, (M) liaison known, (N) library, and (O) network/ support group. The last factor was composed of two variables, (H) parent guide provided and (I) helped to understand rights.

Results of quantitative analysis

Overall satisfaction tended to be highest when the system was responsive to parent needs, was explained in a meeting with the parent and the team, services were fully explained and the rights of the child and parent delineated. In addition, satisfaction was higher when the name of the contact person with whom to address

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current and ensuing issues was identified. The research project did reveal practices that are mandated but not always adhered to. A set of five independent variables that are needed to produce parent satisfaction with their child's educational program were identified.

Discussion

Both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses revealed many ways in which the intent of the law to involve parents in a meaningful way can be attained. The researchers believe it is important to disseminate these finding in Illinois and nationally. School districts should be made aware that parents perceive them as well intentioned for the most part but that many changes in practices are needed to achieve the parent involvement intended by the law and which also would enhance student motivation and performance (Jennings, 1990).

Preservice and inservice training programs should educate regular educators, special educators, support personnel and school staff on how to interact with parents to achieve a partnership in education. The findings should be disseminated to programs that prepare teachers, both regular and special, school psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech and language pathologists.

The research project should be replicated in other states to ascertain whether schools there also are perceived supportive in intent but not in practice as they were in Illinois. The survey approach also could be used by objective outside researchers to evaluate interaction between parents and school personnel in schools and districts.

Because the content of the survey was based on Illinois rules and regulations and an Illinois advisory committee, it may be more appropriate to develop a separate survey instrument for each state related to their own rules and regulations to which local parents could better relate. The wording of the instrument was very appropriate for Illinois but is not necessarily appropriate for other states.

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Appendix

Representative Suggestions from Parents for Enhancing Informed Parental Involvement

- Begin conferences with strengths of student
- Encourage parent input throughout conference
- Inform parents of liaison and how to contact
- Help parents understand rights (remember that each time you meet with parents their understanding is greater than previously but seldom is as complete as yours)
- Communicate in a timely manner
- Keep parents informed about student progress
- If parents are unable to attend the scheduled conference, make every effort to change to a workable date/time or, if that is not possible, devise some way for them to be involved
- Help parents get information on the disability
- Help parents get information on community services
- Help parents locate/begin parent groups and networking opportunities

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